

Dark Star Rising

By David Liss

*I'm a street-walking cheetah
With a heart full of napalm,
I'm a runaway son of the nuclear A-bomb,
I am a world's forgotten boy
The one who searches and destroys.*
—Iggy and The Stooges

Born and raised in Windsor, Canada, the industrial heartland of southern Ontario, John Scott has had working class values, the struggle for dignity and day-to-day survival, hard-wired into his very being. His life and his artistic practice have evolved and been shaped by this perspective. It is the plight of the working person and the everyday lives of ordinary people that have inspired him. He reminds us of those who are often overlooked and forgotten, in a world that favours monuments and accolades for the wealthy, the famous and the powerful. He creates artworks that are statements of protest against pomposity, pretension, aggression and oppression. More deeply Scott's artwork is also intended as an act of resistance to the endless and seemingly inevitable cycles of cruelty, violence and abject behaviours that threaten our very existence. Surely the human imagination has greater potential and is more dynamic than that. Whatever his chosen medium, mostly drawings and transformed objects, his pieces are at once apocalyptic and hopeful; they evoke both fear of annihilation and the shrewd instinct to survive; they embody the conflicted state of anxiety that characterizes our being.

The experience of growing up only a bridge length away from Detroit is also an integral part of John Scott's identity. As the seat of the North American auto industry, Detroit's history is a microcosm of the utopian aspirations and shattered idealism of the Industrial Revolution. During the late 1960s and early '70s Detroit seethed and burned. Joblessness, pollution, racial tension, poverty and distress were endemic to the city. Disaffected youth in the suburbs vented their frustrations by refusing to conform to the played-out expectations of their elders, many of them escaping through drugs and blisteringly loud rock music, specifically, heavy metal and punk. Rock'n'roll was, at its roots, a lowbrow, rebellious cultural form that expressed a yearning for freedom from the drudgery of menial existence. It was invented and played by both blacks and whites and was initially only accepted in blue-collar industrial cities around the Great Lakes, such as Cleveland, Detroit, Windsor and Hamilton. But even by the late 1960s, rock music too had become fully open to exploitation by the powerful forces of capitalism. Detroit and its suburbs, however, became a hotbed for bands that deliberately set out to offend mainstream notions of acceptability and good taste. Exceptionally nasty and subversive bands like the highly politicized MC5 and the nihilistic Iggy Pop and The Stooges did not identify with the West Coast, pacifist, hippie motto, "turn on, tune in, drop out." They were more inclined to, *Search and Destroy*, as expressed in the title of one of The Stooges most notable anthems.. The world was going to shit and so these and other drug- and rage-fuelled bands, armed with loud guitars and pent-up hostility, emerged from the post-industrial wasteland and onto college campuses, concert halls and dive bars across America to spread the word.

All these circumstances are essential to John Scott's formation as a person and to the shaping of his artistic practice. Though he was raised and steeped in the values of the working class, Scott bore direct witness to the explosive events that shook the foundations of an unravelling society. He also understood that change was possible by challenging the social systems that were eroding the values and dignity of the common folk. One could take matters directly into one's own hands and unto the

streets. He identified with those anxious to—needing to—urgently express their disdain for the greed and corruption all around, to expose the machinery of those authorities responsible: schools, teachers, churches, faceless corporations, the military, the politicians. Like many of his generation, he saw that highly motivated, independent action in the form of incendiary rebellion seemed the only noble and viable option. Dropping out of high school, he armed himself with knowledge, gained through extensive readings, especially Marxist philosophy and similarly aligned political and social theory, and he left town.

After a series of miserable jobs in Toronto, Scott had gotten it into his head that the fields of art and architecture were where the real intellectual revolutions were taking place and around 1972 he enrolled in the Ontario College of Art. With no formal or technical training, but anxious to get started, he began to produce quickly rendered drawings in black ink and paint that were raw and crude yet recognized by his instructors as uniquely expressive, embodying a directness and immediacy born of urgency and crackling with restless energy. Not only did drawing become an instantly accessible form of expression, but their production developed into a vital daily ritual for Scott that continues to this day. The act of drawing flows through his being onto any surface at hand. Set up on the walls, tables and the floor of his studio he draws onto random scraps of paper, the backs of street posters, proper archival sheets, paper of monumental scale and cocktail napkins of the bars and restaurants he frequents. Some days he may produce only a few and other days, dozens. But, given his working-class origins and Marxist leanings, it is important to him that his practice is understood to be work, to be labour by which he controls the means of production.

His output of drawings over the years has been astonishingly prolific. They have been sold to friends as well as important private collections and they have been acquired by many museums across Canada. They have been included in solo and group exhibitions at prestigious public and commercial galleries as well as alternative venues, art fairs and charity auctions. Among the many publications documenting his work there is a book of his napkin drawings, *Shiva's Really Scary Gifts*, published in 2002. These drawings infect the language of anxiety and fear—the vocabulary of our era—with empathy and compassion and challenge the “masters” responsible for holding the status quo.

Over the course of nearly 30 years the style of his drawings has remained remarkably consistent yet endlessly inventive—an extraordinary feat. Themes and topics have expanded and shifted, encompassing a wide range of timely social and political issues. New thematic territories are explored as previous ones recur. Early on Scott created a human/bunny hybrid figure infused with a dualistic anxious/stoic, pathetic/hopeful demeanour representing the ordinary person. This has become somewhat of a trademark image for him. Hundreds of images of this character appear in drawings of all scales as well as in room-size drawing installations.

An incident occurred when one of his drawings, a large, roughly rendered image of a cruise missile on a horizontal banner, emblazoned with the slogan *Real Life Size* (1984), was used to lead an anti-missile protest rally. Seeing his piece all over the television news that evening, John saw tangible evidence that art had the potential to affect change in society. He claims that this incident inspires and drives him to this day. Further, the image of the missile drawn to full scale prompted Scott to consider producing large-scale sculptural objects of imposing physical presence in order to up the ante of drama, impact and effect.

Scott has produced numerous such works in which he transforms existing objects, subverting their context and meanings. The most significant of these has been a series of motorcycles, in particular *Avatar* (1998), with a hologram of a face resembling Jesus Christ embedded into the motorcycle's

glass shield. In 1991 he constructed *Europe*, a motorized spinning swastika. Perhaps his most well known work to date is a transformed car, *Trans Am Apocalypse* (edition of three, first version 1988), now in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada. In 1997 he built a half-scale B-2 Stealth bomber, *Black Sun*, and his most recent is a motorcycle attached to a hydraulic-powered spinning drum titled, *Prayer Wheel* (2008). Considered together, these works trace key points along a trajectory (from the Industrial Revolution through the digital age and projecting into the future) that underlies Scott's stark examination of our alignments with technology and the most sinister aspects of the human condition.

Within Scott's lexicon the automobile represents the high point of industrial achievement. His *Trans Am Apocalypse* is an actual Firebird Trans Am, a classic mega-horsepower "muscle car", a potent symbol during the 1970s and '80s of macho power and aggression with the entire Book of Revelation crudely inscribed on its black surface. Revelation is of course noteworthy for its violently graphic descriptions of the Armageddon it predicts. Subverting imagery and ideas from the text, Scott imagines that if the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse were to storm the planet today they would be riding a more contemporary and appropriate form of transportation. Implied within this metaphor is the destruction perpetrated upon the planet by the manufacture and use of the automobile.

The invention of the assembly line allowed the automobile to be mass produced by utilizing thousands of workers performing efficient yet menial, mind-numbingly repetitive tasks that in turn produced huge profits for the companies and their owners. Technologies like this, borne out of the Industrial Revolution made it possible for the Third Reich to destroy people in such unimaginable numbers with the same detached efficiency. For Scott, the Holocaust represents the inevitable result of the alignment of power and technology that allowed large numbers of people to be mobilized into the service of a cause not necessarily known to them. To Scott this is an inevitable, twisted and perverted outcome; the enslavement of people through technology.

For a two-person exhibition, with Ilya Kabokov at Toronto's Power Plant gallery in 1991, Scott produced *Europe*, a 15-foot high, rotating swastika, separated from the viewer by a chain-link fence. The swastika rotated at such high speed that from a distance it could only be perceived as a blur. Upon approach, a motion sensor triggered a strobe light that created split-second glimpses of a pulsating swastika—dramatically rendering visible a harrowing symbol of mass death and destruction. Though the work was perceived as heavy-handed to some critics at the time, it has never been Scott's intention, nor does he feel it appropriate, to couch extreme acts of oppression and murder in politely poetic layers of opaque theory. It is his very definite intention to expose the inner workings of the machinery that makes such despicable activities possible.

It is perhaps largely because of his upbringing that Scott empathises so deeply with victims of oppressive manipulation and suffering at the hands of the lords of industry and war. Two works that were created to mark his identification with such victims are *100 Workers* (several versions, 1988 through 1998) and *Selbst* (1989). In its various manifestations, *100 Workers* is designed as a memorial wall that contains a hundred red-paint-splattered images of a skull, a rose and a hand with a wristwatch. A label accompanying each image bears the name of a person killed in the line of work and the date and circumstances of their accidental death. As opposed to a memorial or statuary that commemorates the accomplishments of powerful individuals, *100 Workers* renders visible with poignant dignity, the lives of ordinary individuals who are often only remembered as statistics—statistics that are often intentionally overlooked. Scott reminds us that the cost of industry includes the lives of human beings. In an interview at the time the first version of the work was installed, he suggested that "blood is the lubricant of the modern industrial world."

To take his empathy to a logical, though transgressive, extreme, Scott created *Selbst*. He had a seven-digit number, similar to victims of German concentration camps, and a rose tattooed on his inner thigh. He then had this section of skin surgically removed. The drying skin was then displayed in a glass case at the entranceway to an exhibition of his work. Again, accusations of sensationalism by colleagues and the media were fierce. For Scott though, the action and the artifact were necessary as visceral and permanent gestures of remembrance—an act of defiance against passivity and against the fading memory of one of the largest mass-murders in human history. Considered together, these two works elaborate on his proposition that the Holocaust was an inevitable by-product of the industrial age. It is no coincidence that in the 1930s Henry Ford received a medal from Adolf Hitler for his financial and technological support of the Nazi Party.

Toward the end of the 20th century, in the “post-industrial” age, as the technologies of manufacturing were becoming digital, the consistency of abject human behaviour did not escape the critical eye of John Scott. It was not lost on him that as industrial technology reached its zenith with the assembly line and the automobile—culminating in countless industrial accidents and the horrors of the Holocaust—the most sophisticated inventions of the new digital age were being developed by and in the service of the military. By the early 1990s it was the American B-2 Stealth aircraft that was the most technologically sophisticated piece of hardware known to man. The nuclear bomb notwithstanding, it was now possible for death and destruction to be rained down with unprecedented efficiency. For his solo exhibition *Engines of Anxiety* at the Gallery of the Saidye Bronfman Centre in Montreal in 1997, Scott created a 35-foot long, half-scale replica of the B-2 bomber. Titled *Black Sun*, the piece was fashioned from Styrofoam and its sleek, bat-like body was covered in black paper with the Book of Revelation, in white text, this time written in Koine, the Greek dialect in which Revelation was originally written. Mounted on a podium, representing a pulpit or lectern from which authoritative figures typically deliver their speeches, the plane was pointed towards a wall in the gallery directly upon which Scott had painted a rough cityscape and a dark, black sun. The effect was stark, haunting and immediate as the B-2 appeared to be making a low pass over a populated area.

A recent sculptural work, *Stealth Mountain* (2008), is something of an amalgam or reprise of *Black Sun* and *Trans Am Apocalypse*. This work consists of the hood of a muscle car mounted upon a low, triangular steel base. Remarkably, the sleek, thin form of the car hood bears a passing resemblance to the Stealth bomber—not something that Scott would consider merely coincidental. Indeed, both the automobile and sophisticated hardware like the Stealth are products of the one-in-the-same military/industrial complex.

Inspired by futurist author Arthur C. Clarke’s 1967 short story, *The Nine Billion Names of God*, and Martin Heidegger’s ideas about being, technology and truth, Scott hones in more acutely on the relationship between humans and technology with his most recent major work, *Prayer Wheel*. It is Heidegger’s notion that technology is a mechanism for revealing the truth; that human handicraft is the means by which to identify the true forms that exist prior to perception. As such, the essence of all history can be determined through invented technologies that embody both a supreme danger but also the power to save—the choice determined by either our subservience to or control of technology. In Clarke’s story, a monk in a Tibetan monastery purchases a computer for the purpose of generating all the possible names of God, a task thought to be beyond human capability. He believes that this will reveal the underlying mysteries of the cosmos, but the very moment that the computer completes the calculation the stars in the night sky are extinguished, signalling the end of time. No doubt Clarke’s analogy comes from Heidegger’s reference that “truth becomes a

constellation; the stellar course of the mystery” and his attendant observation that many stars have long been dead and have lost their source of light.

The Prayer Wheel is Scott’s adaptation of the ancient Tibetan prayer wheel within the context of contemporary culture. The piece consists of a low-slung, menacing-looking black motorcycle with its back wheel rigged to rotate a large, brushed aluminium metal drum. On the exterior of the drum are printed the Eight Auspicious Symbols of Buddhism written in Sanskrit. The technology, the symbols, prayers and their intentions lie inert awaiting human activation. The effects of that engagement between technology and human activity, its dangers or power to save are uncertain. With *The Prayer Wheel* Scott brings us to the very precipice of the great Void, as we contemplate our dance with our ever-evolving technologies and the many potential ways these can deepen our understanding of the world around us or be used to obliterate us altogether.

Scott’s drawing activities remain constant. Recent depictions include dark images of foreboding figures, sometimes dressed in vaguely historical military garb, often with the designation Dark Commander scrawled across them. Well-known photographs documenting the torture and humiliation of Iraqi prisoners by American forces at Abu Ghraib prison directly inspire another series of pictures. There are references and “portraits” of people such as Conrad Black and other corporate leaders whose downfalls have been paraded lately through the media and the legal system with alarming frequency for their brazen and avaricious white-collar crimes. Frightened bunnies and emaciated figures that continue to populate tattered landscapes are cast within the context of current and historical themes and also contemporary issues of militarized power, aggression and oppression. They are trapped (as are we) within those inevitable and perpetual cycles.

Scott’s raw, tough and spontaneous approach to drawing continues to pulse with the youthful energy of committed rebellion, offering scathing indictments of the ruling classes. It is also noteworthy that the appeal of his work is widespread and continues to be influential to younger generations of art students as well being desirable to collectors, galleries and museums. In 2000 he received the Governor General’s Award for excellence in the arts, the highest honour bestowed upon an artist in Canada. Fully aware of the contradictions inherent in a critical and rebellious figure receiving such a high level of respectability, Scott noted in his acceptance speech that “it is important to bite the hand that feeds.” But by being actively and ceaselessly critical, by not accepting at face value the falsehoods promised and crimes committed by those willing to risk all, including the lives of others, for their personal gain, he is an upstanding citizen of this world. Like the dark star whose gravitational pull is strong enough to trap light, John Scott’s artwork is ultimately intended to reflect an optimism and hope that may be deeply embedded within the psyche of a world in its twilight.

I believe that the catastrophe story, whoever may tell it, represents a constructive and positive act by the imagination, rather than a negative one, an attempt to confront the terrifying void of a patently meaningless universe by challenging it at its own game, to remake zero by provoking it in every conceivable way.

- J.G. Ballard

David Liss is Director/Curator of the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art in Toronto. In 1997 he curated *John Scott: Engines of Anxiety*, a two-venue solo exhibition at the Gallery of the Saidye Bronfman Centre for the Arts and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, in Montreal. He has also included works by John Scott in several group exhibitions including, *Artifice 98 Montreal*, *The Terminal Show* at the Drake Hotel in Toronto in 2004, and *Darkness Ascends* at the Museum of

Contemporary Canadian Art in 2006. Liss included a presentation of John Scott's work in his curated series, *Solo Projects* at the ARCO fair in Madrid, Spain in 2008.